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SUBJECT Chemical Espionage

BRYANT GUMBEL: On Closeup this morning, chemical espionage. As Bob Jamieson reported moments ago, the State Department has charged the Soviets have been using a chemical tracking agent on American Embassy personnel in Moscow for the past ten years. And the State Department explains this chemical might cause genetic mutations and cancer.

One of those who may have been exposed, if all this is true, is Malcolm Toon, who was Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1976 to 1979. He joins us now from our bureau in Washington.

What do you make of this latest charge against the Soviets?

MALCOLM TOON: Well, it's -- I wouldn't call it atypical behavior for the Soviets. It's part of a pattern of harassment that we have seen in the past, starting with the radiation of the embassy building in Moscow, which I was exposed to many years ago. And I think this is the sort of thing that we can expect from the Soviets. They're not very pleasant people, as you know.

And frankly, I'm surprised that this sort of thing has happened. But I think we have to recognize it as the sort of harassment that we have come to expect from the Soviets.

GUMBEL: Since there is at least the possibility, then, that this is on you, and there is at least the possibility...

TOON: On me?

GUMBEL: Yes. Well, you were there at the time they say

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it took place. You seem to take it very lightly.

TOON: Can you see it?

GUMBEL: No. But tell me I couldn't anyway.

TOON: No [unintelligible].

GUMBEL: Do you accept it as fact?

TOON: Well, yes, I do. I have to believe what the State Department said yesterday and what the White House announced. I'm frankly surprised to hear that apparently we have known about this for a number of years, going all the way back to the time when I was Ambassador. And if in face we did know about this -- and I don't think this has been proven yet -- if in fact we did know about it and I was not told, then I would be very mad indeed.

GUMBEL: So wait a minute. So where does that leave us? Then either they didn't know about it all this time, as they say they did, or they didn't tell you. Either way, you would think you would have to be aggravated. No?

TOON: Well, I'm saying, Bryant, that if in fact they did know at the time I was Ambassador and I was not told, then I think I have a right to be outraged.

GUMBEL: In the years since, you don't think they should have told you if they knew?

TOON: Yes, I think they should have. Yes.

GUMBEL: Is the timing of this charge significant, Mr. Ambassador?

TOON: Well, I don't think, as some people have speculated, that this is a deliberate attempt on the part of the Administration to sour the atmosphere in advance of the summit conference. I think probably what happened is that they've discovered just recently that this is dangerous to health, or possibly dangerous to health, and therefore they feel that the employees should be told about it.

GUMBEL: I was not necessarily...

TOON: And it's nigh time, I must say.

GUMBEL: I was not necessarily looking to the summit. I was wondering about the timing in relation to the announcement of the ASAT missile testing. Is it intended to negate that publicity?

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TOON: Well, I would not attribute that sort of motive to the Administration. I don't agree with the Administration in many respects, as you know, but I doubt very much whether it is fair to the Administration to allege that they are doing this deliberately to offset certain other unpleasant aspects of the present atmosphere.

GUMBEL: Is it likely the State Department went public with this because quiet diplomacy failed?

TOON: Well, that I don't know. I'm not privy, as you know, to what goes on these days between ourselves and the Soviets. And I just don't know whether they approached the Soviets privately and got no satisfaction, and therefore decided to go public.

I think one of the reasons why they did decide to go public was that they discovered that this is potentially dangerous to health, and therefore they felt an obligation to tell the people in Moscow that they do run a certain risk. And then they can decide whether they want to stay on or not.

We handled the radiation problem the same way after a number of years of silence.

GUMBEL: Senator Thurmond is now saying we should close our Moscow Embassy, perhaps. Senator Durenberger is saying we should expel some of their diplomats that are here.

How would you like to see us react to what we now believe?

TOON: Well, with all respect to Senator Thurmond, I think that's a totally irresponsible recommendation. I think no matter how badly the Soviets misbehave and no matter how much distaste we have for their leadership -- and I yield to no one, as you know, in my distaste for the Soviet leadership -- we've got to maintain a relationship with Moscow. The world is much too dangerous a place for us to keep them at arm's length and have nothing to do with them.

And therefore I think we have to carry on a dialogue with these people, we have to try to make them behave a little bit better than they have in the past. But even if they misbehave, we have to talk with them.

Now, with regard to the other Senator's recommendation, I can see some merit in that. But when we do that, of course, we lose people in Moscow. So we have to be prepared for retaliation.

I think we'd better take a tough line with the Soviets

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and get them to stop this nonsense.

GUMBEL: Ambassador Malcolm Toon.

I still don't see it on you. You look terrific.

...In just a moment some further opinions on the great spy dust operation.

* * *

JANE PAULEY: So, what is this chemical that the Soviets are using to track Americans in Moscow? The State Department says it's a potentially dangerous mutagen.

Joining us from Washington to talk about this morning, David Scott Smith, who's the Director of Safety and a consultant on chemical use at George Washington University Medical Center in Washington; and John Barron, a former U.S. Naval Intelligence officer, who has researched and written a great deal about the KGB.

Mr. Smith, had you heard of this stuff before?

DAVID SCOTT SMITH: Actually, no, I hadn't, Jane. I was somewhat surprised when I received a call from your team yesterday making an inquiry about it. It's a highly unusual chemical, in that it's infrequently seen in both research settings and in the commercial and industrial sectors. I was completely unfamiliar with it, in fact, until I initiated some research last evening, at your team's request.

PAULEY: So, are you qualified to speak at all. If it is used sporadically, as the State Department has said it has been and is, is it dangerous enough to warrant the closing of an embassy, as some United States Senators have suggested?

SMITH: I think that some generalizations can be made about chemicals based on the generals groups under which -- that is, chemical groups under which they fall. And thus it may be possible to presume that there might be certain toxic effects that one would see in this chemical which would mimic the toxic effects that are seen in other chemicals that have similar structures.

I don't think at this time that any action, such as evacuating the embassy or other similar actions, are warranted at this time. I think that a careful study of this chemical, consultation with State Department medical personnel and those knowledgeable about the toxicology of this particular chemical is warranted, however.

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PAULEY: Mr. Barron, is this a typical KGB tactic?

JOHN BARRON: Yes, this is typical of what they've been doing for many, many years. It's something that we must expect.

I would just say this, that I think it's absolutely ludicrous to suggest that the United States Government is engaging in propaganda because it chooses to tell the American people the truth about what is happening. If we had spoken up about the previous depradations, then perhaps we wouldn't be victimized by this latest one.

PAULEY: Why wouldn't a former Ambassador in Moscow, Malcolm Toon, to be specific, have been told? He said he's never been told, and he was there until 1979.

BARRON: Well, I don't know about the use of this particular chemical agent. I'm sure that the Ambassador has been told about the beatings of our people, the degradation of our wives, the drugging of our personnel, the types of intolerable and uncivilized behavior that we are subjected to in Moscow. About this latest agent, I don't know. But we have had other powders, chemicals employed against us for many years. And I'm sure he's aware of those.

PAULEY: Just talking in terms of spy tactics and strategies, once you know about the kind of tracking agent the other guys are using, isn't it possible to neutralize it?

BARRON: Well, I'm not sure that we always do know. In other words, we have 205 Soviet personnel in our embassies, in our apartments there. They're continuously devising in the KGB new tactics. And I'm not confident that we always are aware of them.

PAULEY: Our embassy personnel, surely they're sophisticated enough to know that they may be tracked by some form of tracking agent, and would behave accordingly, wouldn't they?

BARRON: There is a limitation to what can be done in a human life. For example, it's so extreme in Moscow now that a husband and wife who wish to exchange confidences can only do so securely by huddling together in a shower and whispering. It's very difficult to conduct your life that way. And so there always are lapses. You cannot be vigilant incessantly.

PAULEY: Mr. Smith, I'm wondering, you know, with a chemical like this, should individuals and personnel in the embassy who may have been exposed be taking some medical action now to see if they have been made ill or might one day become ill because of their exposure to this chemical?

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SMITH: Jane, I think that the medical people with the State Department will make a determination as to exactly what medical tests, if any, are warranted at this time. Certainly part of the determination would be the determination of the length of the exposure, possible dosages that were involved, and the nature of the exposure route -- that is, whether there was a possibility of skin absorption, inhalation, ingestion, etcetera.

And once those kinds of determinations have been made, then one could proceed with appropriate medical testing.

PAULEY: All right....

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